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CIA Under Fire

By Richard Starnes



THE murmuring chorus of Americans who are deeply concerned with the growing power and headlong willfulness of the Central Intelligence Agency has been joined by former President Truman.

Mr. Truman must be accounted an expert witness in this matter, because it was under his Administration that the CIA came into being. In a copyrighted article he wrote recently that the CIA had strayed wide of the purposes for which he had organized it. "It has," he wrote, "become an operational and at times a policy-making arm of the Government. This has led to trouble and may have compounded our difficulties in several explosive areas."

For writing substantially the same thing from South Viet Nam last fall, this reporter was (and still is) subjected to a calculated behind-the-scenes campaign of opprobrium at the hands of the CIA. So, indeed, has the United States Ambassador to Saigon been subjected to the same sort of behind-the-hand attack, on the theory that he was the source of my account of the CIA's heedless bureaucratic arrogance in Saigon. Mr. Lodge, it is now charged by CIA apologists, destroyed the effectiveness of one of the CIA's most skillful agents. It is also charged that this reporter violated a gentleman's agreement in naming the agent.

Both charges are false, meaching and disingenuous.

The name of the agent, hurriedly summoned home from Saigon within 24 hours of my account of his stewardship of the huge spook operation, was John Richardson. In my several conversations with Ambassador Lodge, Mr. Richardson's name never passed between us.

It was, indeed, not necessary for any wayfaring journalist to go to any such exalted figures to descry the activities of the CIA's station chief in Saigon. Mr. Richardson, a frequent visitor at the presidential palace and a close adviser to the devious and powerful Ngo Dinh Nhu, was widely known in the Viet Name capital. Until Mr. Lodge replaced Frederick Nolting as Ambassador, most knowledge-

able Americans and sophisticated Viet Name regarded Mr. Richardson as the most powerful foreigner in Viet Nam.

It is nonsense to say that Mr. Lodge destroyed Mr. Richardson's value as a CIA agent. In Saigon, Mr. Richardson was as clandestine as a callope with a full head of steam. It is, moreover, a libel to allege (as high CIA officials have alleged) that this reporter violated an agreement to shield Mr. Richardson's identity. In all my assiduous inquiries about the man never once was it suggested that there was any agreement to keep his identity secret. If there had been any such agreement I, of course, would have respected it even tho it would have been plainly absurd in view of Mr. Richardson's notoriety.

This is, unfortunately, more than a parochial dispute between a reporter and a writhing, unlovely bureaucracy. The President of the United States himself has been misled by the CIA mythology regarding just how and by whom Mr. Richardson's utility as chief resident spook was destroyed. Neither Mr. Lodge nor any journalist cast Mr. Richardson in his role in Saigon. If CIA Chief John McCone really believes that his man in Saigon was compromised by my dispatches (and presumably he does believe this or as he has) then he does not know what is going on in the huge, bumbling apparatus he nominally heads.

Mr. Truman knows whereof he speaks. Wise in the ways of malignant bureaucracy he knows that unfettered and unaccountable power such as is vested in the CIA is bound to feed upon itself until it poses a threat to the very free institutions it was founded to safeguard. No man alive knows the enormous power that is now vested in the CIA, nor the wealth it dispenses, nor the policy it makes. Most people in government would be appalled if they knew that already the CIA has overflowed its huge new headquarters building in McLean, Va., but it is a fact that it has done so.

There is far, far too much about the CIA that is unknown to far too many Americans. We will, occasionally and from time to time, swing this same sackbut. It is not a pretty tune it plays, but it is an important one.